"The Strategy Process" in Tempe

This article is part 2 of a 3 part series from the city of Tempe, Arizona



left to right: Charlie Meyer, City Manager, Tempe, AZ and Gretchen Maynard, OD Administrator, Tempe, AZ

by Charlie Meyer, City Manager and Gretchen Maynard, OD Administrator, Tempe, AZ

2 OCTOBER 2012

In their August 7 article: **"The People Process"**, Tempe City Manager Charlie Meyer and Gretchen Maynard, Tempe Organizational Development Administrator, offer a comprehensive narrative of the "People Process," the first component of their three-pronged, citywide Leadership Development Program. In part two of this three-part series, Charlie and Gretchen explain "Strategy" as the second element in their pursuit to achieving high performance execution in getting the most important things done.

This article is part 2 of a 3 part series from the city of Tempe, Arizona By Charlie Meyer, City Manager and Gretchen Maynard, OD Administrator, Tempe, AZ

Gretchen Maynard, OD Administrator:

Developing and sustaining high performance means doing the right things from a strategic perspective and doing things right from a tactical, day-to-day view. It means being willing to develop processes and systems that work together to support our organization's highest purpose and strategic initiatives. Systems drive behavior. So if we put unintelligent systems in place, we get people doing unintelligent things...

Start with Purpose:

Aligning systems starts with defining our purpose. If the organization does not have a clear, compelling vision and purpose, departments and work groups tend to make up their own purpose which sometimes has little or no relation to the organization's purpose. Unclear purpose produces misalignment, hidden agendas, rivalries and political gaming. So, the first wildly important goal in our "strategy process" was to create greater strategic alignment through clarifying our purpose.

Most organizations have a mission, vision and values that include objectives like "provide great customer service" or "be a great place to work". These are important ambitions but they don't describe the heartbeat of the organization. Tempe broke the traditional strategic planning mold where discussions of mission and vision are generally limited to high-level management groups.

We solicited volunteers at all levels from across the city to help develop a purpose statement that everyone could relate, remember and align to their daily work efforts.

Keeping it simple was one of the most difficult parts of this process. Purpose, when crafted well, states simply and without "spin" the essential reason for our existence; the value we provide to those we serve. Here's what our workforce came up with: Tempe creates outstanding value for those we serve through shared vision, superior service and sustainable practices.

The next step was to ask departments and workgroups to develop functional purpose statements that align to our organizational purpose. We offered departments and workgroups opportunities to participate in facilitated brainstorming and development sessions. Some teams walked into these sessions thinking the process would be easy; and left with headaches because the questions we asked were difficult, like: If your workgroup disappeared tomorrow, would you be missed? And, how does your team specifically contribute to the city's financial and resource sustainability? If you think this exercise sounds easy, try it with your team. You may be surprised at how much rigorous thought and analysis is required!

Purpose statements are living, breathing proclamations of how teams align to the greater whole and the importance of why we come to work each day. Purpose statements reconfirm. Whether we fight crime, prevent fires, provide financial management or maintain stewardship of our city-owned infrastructure; whatever our individual roles, we are an integral part of one workforce whose "purpose" is to support and continuously improve the City of Tempe in providing outstanding value for those we serve.

Charlie Meyer, City Manager:

Strategic focus in part means having those "blue-sky" discussions of what is possible and what's really important. Being strategic means gathering input from our city council, our community and our employees. Being strategic often means deciding what we aren't going to do not just what are we are going to do. Having high-level strategic discussions are swell... but if we don't develop strategic plans that map out "how" to deliver our most important goals, then those strategies don't mean much.

Operational vs. Strategic:

Ineffective strategy tends to be abstract or limited to operational planning. Operational planning is important, but to go from good to great means developing strategies that move beyond defining all the measures for monitoring the day-to-day work. To continuously improve, we must identify the "wildly important" which are those few, top priority goals outside the day-to-day operations that will create added value. A good strategic plan illustrates clear alignment to organizational priorities by answering key questions like:

- Does this strategic plan link to our organizational purpose and strategic priorities?
- How sustainable is this plan?
- Do we have the organizational capacity to execute the plan?
- Do we have the right people in place to execute the strategy? If not, how do we get them?
- Can we adapt the plan if changes are necessary?

Strategic Leadership:

Executive leadership must be responsible for developing and driving organizational strategy. From my vantage point as a city manager, it's important that I have a management team willing to sit down and have eyeball to eyeball conversations on very tough issues and hold each other mutually accountable. This means agreeing that we

will develop consistent standards for the city. It means exhibiting dependability by following up, and (the toughest one of all) it means holding each other accountable by having the intestinal fortitude to confront each other and say: you're heading off in a direction that's inconsistent with the rest of us.

Department heads must have one foot in their department and one foot in the organization. If they are only operating well within their department, then they are not meeting my objectives and standards. We have to hold each other accountable, across departments, to meet the priority goals of the city and to continuously improve. That's where the strategy process really starts.

The Tipping Point:

A great strategic system not only aligns to achieve the organization's highest priorities, it enables people to come together across departmental lines to execute their best work. We set ourselves up for mediocrity if our strategy is determined in a vacuum and handed down to staff. At its best, strategic planning includes collaboration between elected officials, management and the staff closest to the action – the people charged with executing the plan.

Strategic planning is not new nor does it traditionally include line-level staff. So, you might be wondering whether this collaborative piece is really necessary. In Tempe we are learning through doing from leaders actively adding this collaborative ingredient into their strategic planning. These leaders are gaining early team buy-in on the all-important "how to" of executing the strategy and gaining terrific results. As the buy-in and terrific results spread through the organization, we approach the tipping point when it becomes part of the culture.

Gretchen Maynard, OD Administrator:

To be strategic in today's world means developing a culture of continuous improvement where value is achieved by constantly raising the bar to increase productivity, maximize efficiency and reduce costs. From my vantage point as an organizational development professional, it means cultivating high performance that thrives within constant change. This can be chaotic and exhausting if we don't connect change to continuous improvement.

Charlie Meyer, City Manager:

Stability through change demands knowing, with clarity, what we are trying to accomplish. It requires keeping our objectives at a high-altitude to remain flexible in changing conditions; and specific when determining the "how to" part of the plan.

Developing collaborative strategies across departmental lines builds innovative teams who focus on the right details at the right time, and are passionate about delivering results that are in clear alignment with the organization's top priorities. This is the Strategy Process.

Closing the Loop:

The Strategy Process defines where the organization wants to go, the People Process defines who is going to get us there and the Operations Process takes strategy and converts it to action and achievement. In part three of this series we will put it all together and close the loop as we discuss the operations part of our Leadership Development Process.